

Senate Backs Bill Limiting Chemical Arms Ban

By [Steven Lee Myers](#)
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The Senate approved legislation today that some arms-control experts warned would significantly undercut enforcement of an international treaty banning chemical weapons.

The treaty, known as the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1997, was approved by the Senate only last year and calls for inspections of private American chemical companies.

While allowing such inspections for the first time, the legislation passed today, as part of a larger bill aimed at Iran's missile programs, would also impose tough restrictions. They were put forward at the insistence of some of the treaty's opponents, including the Republican Senators Jesse Helms of North Carolina and Jon Kyl of Arizona.

The conditions would, among other things, limit the number of inspections per year, restrict the location where suspect samples could be tested and give the President the unilateral right to block surprise inspections on national security grounds, something not allowed under the treaty.

The Clinton Administration, which fought hard to win Senate approval of the treaty, has publicly supported the legislation, even though officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, conceded that it poses problems.

One of those officials noted that the United States had insisted during the treaty negotiations on the need for surprise inspections and said that the provisions passed today would "in essence gut the strongest verification regimes ever included in an arms-control agreement."

But the director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, John D. Holum, has said the priority is to approve the legislation clearing the way for industry inspections, which are now almost a year overdue under the treaty's terms. "We don't want to lose the opportunity to get the legislation passed," he said in an interview before the vote.

Included as it was in the Iran bill, which passed overwhelmingly, the legislation received little attention during today's debate. However, Senator Jeff Bingaman, Democrat of New Mexico, expressed concern that by imposing conditions on the inspections, the United States would encourage other countries, like Iran, to do the same.

Jose M. Bustani, Director General of the treaty's governing panel in The Hague, said today that two other countries had already said they would follow the United States' lead on restricting sites where samples can be tested. He added that any restrictions on inspections would "seriously undermine the implementation of this convention."

The legislation's fate remains uncertain. Mr. Clinton has threatened to veto the larger bill, which would nullify this legislation as well.

Under the treaty, which 108 countries have now signed, Governments pledge to halt the manufacture and use of all chemical weapons and to destroy their remaining stockpiles. The treaty allows investigators from The Hague to inspect private industry, as well as military sites, to insure the treaty's goals.

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